

# Nine Characteristics of High - Performing Schools:

*What successful results-oriented schools  
have in common*

*Adapted from:*

Shannon, G.S. & Bylsma, P. (2007). *The Nine Characteristics of High-Performing Schools: A research-based resource for schools and districts to assist with improving student learning.* (2nd Ed.). Olympia, WA: OSPI.

# Overview of Successful School Research

- **Research on “Characteristics of High-performing Schools”**
  - Synthesis of research done by the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction in the State of Washington
  - Includes a wide range of research from over 120 research and professional references
  - Research summary is found in a publication entitled [“Nine Characteristics of High-performing Schools”](#)

# Key Reminders

- Schools should always be in a state of continual improvement.
- No school has reached perfection in all characteristics.
- Schools may excel in some areas, but may need help in others.
- Becoming a high-quality school takes years of hard work.
- There are no simple solutions or a singular thing that are “magic”.
- Schools often have a gap between knowing best practices and doing them. The key to improvement is closing the gap between them.
- Common characteristics *are* found in high-performing schools.
- Schools can, and should make efforts to learn from each other.

# Nine Characteristics of High Performing Schools – An Overview

1. Clear and Shared Focus
2. High Standards and Expectations for All Students
3. Effective School Leadership
4. High Levels of Collaboration and Communication
5. Curriculum and Instruction Aligned with Standards
6. Frequent Monitoring of Teaching and Learning
7. Focused Professional Development
8. Supportive Learning Environment
9. High Levels of Community and Parent Engagement

# 1. A Clear and Shared Focus: What it Means

- There is a shared vision for the school which focuses on student learning.
- The shared vision drives policy, practice, and decision-making.
- All stakeholders have an understanding of purpose: what they are doing, why they are doing it, and where they are headed.
- Everyone has an understanding of what their role is in achieving the vision.
- The focus and vision are developed, at least in part, from common beliefs and values.
- Data is used effectively to analyze, evaluate, and improve.

# 1. Clear and Shared Focus: What It Looks Like

- Stakeholders (staff, students, parents, community) are aware of, and can articulate the shared focus and vision.
- Resources (time, space, materials, practices) are aligned to support the shared focus and vision.
- Teaching and learning are organized around the shared focus and vision.
- There is a commitment to continual improvement.
- Data is utilized to measure successes of shared focus and vision, and used to build on strengths and correct weaknesses.

## 2. High Standards and Expectations for All Students – What it Means

- Teachers and staff believe that all students can learn and meet high standards.
- Students believe they can learn and meet high standards.
- Students are offered high rigor courses and courses of study.
- Students are encouraged to take high-rigor courses and courses of study.
- Teachers focus on student success and create models, systems, and strategies focusing on student success at a high levels.
- A primary focus is to help students become college and career ready.

## 2. High Standards and Expectations for All Students – What it Looks Like

- Instruction focuses on high expectations, using excellent teaching pedagogies and high quality performance assessments.
- Consistency, alignment, and articulation are seen between grade levels and content areas.
- Clear links exist between instruction and assessment.
- Students are clear about what expectations are and what quality work is.
- Staff and students articulate their belief in their capacity for success.
- Instruction is personalized for students.



## 2. High Standards and Expectations for All Students – What it Looks Like, Continued

- Staff use outcomes to analyze trends, and plan strategies around data for the purpose of improving student learning.
- Professional development is aligned with staff needs, based upon student data.
- Resources such as time, staff, materials, and other key ingredients are organized around what is necessary to obtain high performance for all students.

### 3. Effective School Leadership: What it Means

- Leadership includes district and school staff and administration.
- Leadership is necessary in both instructional and administrative areas in order to have high-performing schools.
- High quality leaders are proactive in what they do.
- Effective leadership begins with relational trust, and is usually distributed, sustainable, and collaborative.
- Leadership focuses on developing a culture for school improvement with student success at the core.
- Leadership is not tied to a style, personality, or position.

### 3. Effective School Leadership: What it Looks Like

- Good leaders work to develop, articulate, implement, and nurture a vision of high quality schools.
- Good leaders work on school cultures that focus on student learning and outcomes along with staff professional growth.
- Good leaders ensure the priorities and management of schools match their vision.
- Good leaders collaborate with the stakeholders in their schools.
- Good leaders model excellence, and mentor others.
- Good leaders work to remove barriers to student learning.

## 4. High Levels of Collaboration and Communication – What it Means

- Teamwork is evident in schools among teachers, administration, students, and parents.
- Communication is of high quality and timely.
- Staff collaboration is focused on things that matter: curriculum and instruction, improving practice, and student success.
- There is a strong sense of community, both internal and external.
- Systems are articulated and aligned.
- External stakeholders (parents and community) are engaged in the educational process and decision making.

## 4. High Levels of Collaboration and Communication – What it Looks Like

- Schools provide structure, time, and support for collaboration.
- Staff and parents are involved in school improvement together.
- Regular, two-way communication occurs.
- School teams reflect the diversity of the school community.
- Parent teams reflect the diversity of the broader community.
- Multiple means for communication exist such as newsletters, websites, home visits, and/or other electronic communications.

## 5. Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessments Aligned with Standards – What it Means

- Curriculum is planned around academic learning requirements.
- Research-based strategies are utilized in the classroom.
- Assessments are aligned to planned curriculum and standards.
- Instruction is not only aligned to standards, but varied according to student needs.
- Consistent frameworks are used in developing curriculum, with focus on big picture ideas, essential questions, student learning outcomes, assessment of learning, and instructional practices.
- Formative assessments (assessment FOR learning) and summative assessments (assessment OF learning) are both used effectively.

## 5. Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessments Aligned with Standards – What it Means

- Curriculum is aligned to state standards and between grade levels.
- Curriculum and instruction are based on best practice research.
- Instruction is focused on high expectations, and is personalized, based upon individual student needs.
- Culturally responsive teaching strategies are utilized.
- Assessments (formative and summative) line up with what is intended to be learned.
- Grading primarily reflects student learning instead of other things.
- Students are directly involved in assessing their own learning.

## 6. Frequent Monitoring of Learning and Teaching: What it Means

- Monitoring is defined as “analyzing what we are doing against the results we are getting and wanting.” (Schmoker, 1996)
- Regular use of different assessments occurs to identify individual student progress, and teaching is adjusted based upon it.
- More support time, resources, and/or different instruction are provided to students who need help or desire to accelerate.
- Assessment results are regularly used to improve instruction.
- Students, parents, and teachers all monitor student progress.
- Regular, non-threatening feedback occurs, leading to improvement.



## 6. Frequent Monitoring of Learning and Teaching: What it Looks Like

- Teachers use assessment information to modify their own practice.
- Assessment is aligned with curriculum.
- Assessment is seen as much as a tool FOR learning as it is OF learning.
- Teaching and learning are a key focus of staff supervision and evaluation.
- Principals are in classrooms often, observing instruction.
- Time and resources are in place for reflection and review of teaching and learning.
- Teacher schedules are organized effectively to encourage collaboration around teaching and learning.

## 6. Frequent Monitoring of Learning and Teaching: What it Looks Like, Continued

- Student outcome goals are clear and explicit and shared.
- Student goals, progress, and strategies for improvement are shared regularly with parents.
- Strategies, practices, and programs are changed if needed, based upon student performance.
- Multiple assessments are used in the classroom, including formative assessments, summative assessments, measurement of academic progress such as MAP/NWEA, as well as standardized tests.
- Coherent grading practices are used that reflect desired learning.

## 7. Focused Professional Development: What it Means

- Teachers are expected to develop deeper knowledge and new skills.
- An emphasis for professional development is placed on training staff in areas of greatest need.
- Data (student data and teacher feedback) drives ongoing professional development.
- Professional Development is aligned to the school's vision and goals.
- All professional development is developed and evaluated in relation to the impact on student learning and improvement of teaching.
- Professional development is regular, ongoing, and embedded.

## 7. Focused Professional Development: What it Looks Like

- It is based on data and needs, and sustained over time.
- It is deliberate and purposeful and focused on skill development to support student learning.
- It engages all employees: administrators, teachers, paras, etc.
- Professional development models good instructional practices.
- Professional development is customized as best as possible to meet individual learner (teacher) needs.
- It is job-embedded and integral (relevant) to the daily work of staff.
- It has input from teachers based on their perceived needs.

## 8. Supportive Learning Environments: What it Means

- The school is a safe place and the culture of the school promotes learning.
- Students feel connected to staff, and healthy relationships are valued.
- The school and its classrooms reflect a “warm”, caring environment.
- High expectations exist for staff, students, and parents.
- Instruction is personalized, and small learning environments exist as much as possible.
- School culture reflects a healthy and intellectually stimulating learning environment.

## 8. Supportive Learning Environments: What it Looks Like

- Students, parents, and staff show loyalty and bonding to the school.
- Good classroom management is found, and contributes to learning in the classroom and overall school behavior.
- The school is making progress in achievement, discipline, attendance, and other key indicators.
- A respectful and courteous environment is seen between all stakeholders.
- Students take responsibility for their own learning and behavior.

## 9. High Level of Family and Community Involvement: What it Means

- Students, parents, and school staff all feel a sense of responsibility in the educational process.
- Community involvement is evident through formal partnerships and informal relationships and activities.
- A wide range of parents, and high numbers of parents are engaged in schools.
- Parents are involved in a variety of ways in engaging in schools.

## 9. High Level of Family and Community Involvement: What it Looks Like

- A broad range of parents and community members have active voices in school improvement processes.
- Parents understand their important roles, why they should be involved, and what they are capable of contributing.
- School staff understand the importance of family engagement and create opportunities for their involvement.
- Parents are offered training and assistance in the roles they can play.
- Parents are “recruited” from a wide range of groups to serve in key roles.
- There is frequent use of diverse means to engage parents with communication vehicles and opportunities for involvement.



# Characteristics of High-performing Schools: Moving to Action

- Review and discuss the nine characteristics of high-performing schools.
- Which ones are evident in your own school?
- Which ones are areas you would like to see improvement on?
- If your team began to work on one area of improvement, what area would it focus on?
- If you focused on one area, what steps can you take to make improvements?
- What obstacles do you see?
- What resources are needed to affect change?

# High-performing Schools: *Moving from Here to There*

One of the mindsets that all high-performing schools have is that while they may be excellent overall, there is always room for improvement.

Aspiring to greatness and excellence and acting on those aspirations, is equally important as arriving at the level of being a high-performing school.

Success is as much a journey as it is a destination.